

Who Is the Real Mohsen Mahdawi?



MOHSEN MAHDAWI SPEAKS OUTSIDE THE COURTHOUSE AFTER A JUDGE RELEASED THE PALESTINIAN STUDENT ACTIVIST ON WEDNESDAY, APRIL 30, 2025 IN BURLINGTON, VT. (AP PHOTO/AMANDA SWINHART)

Supporters of the pro-Palestinian student organizer at Columbia say he is a blameless victim. Police reports, social media posts, and court filings tell a more complicated story.

By Maya Sulkin

05.06.25 — U.S. Politics

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UPGRADE TO LISTEN

5 MINS

“

I am saying it clear and loud to President Trump and his cabinet: I am not afraid of you,” said a defiant [Mohsen Mahdawi](#) after the pro-

Palestinian student organizer at Columbia University was freed last week from federal custody while he fights the administration's push to deport him.

In his public statements since his release, Mohsen Mahdawi has portrayed himself as a blameless victim of a heavy-handed effort by the Trump administration to punish foreign students for their political opinions. "My only 'crime' is refusing to accept the slaughter of Palestinians, opposing war and promoting peace," he [wrote in *The New York Times*](#) on Friday.

Much of the news coverage has struck a similarly sympathetic tone, focusing on Mahdawi's defiance—and his belief in the need for common ground between Israelis and Palestinians. In his first network television interview after being freed, he called his release "[a light of hope](#)."

But court filings, a police report, and social media posts paint a very different—and much more troubling—picture of the activist locked in a legal fight with the administration. At stake here is not just the question of who Mahdawi really is—but how he obtained a green card to begin with and whether he should keep it.



Mahdawi, 34, grew up in a refugee camp in the West Bank and arrived in the U.S. in 2014. Vermont locals [told a TV station](#) that he moved to the state after he met and married an American woman stationed in the Middle East on military service.

Only a year later, Mahdawi was the focus of a police report in Windsor, Vermont. According to the report, a gun-shop owner told police that Mahdawi came to his store twice, was interested in buying a sniper rifle

and an automatic weapon, and said that he “used to build modified 9mm submachine guns to kill Jews while he was in Palestine.”

Mahdawi offered to work at the store “for no monetary payment” to learn about “making guns and modifying guns,” the report said. The owner also told police that he saw Mahdawi taking photographs outside the gun shop. When Mahdawi said he planned to give the photos to the owner to post on Facebook, he was invited inside the store and took more photos, according to the police report. The owner told police that he concluded Mahdawi wanted to know “what was in place for security cameras, the type of locks and security on the doors, and to detail the merchandise in the business.”

LAW Incident Offenses Detail:

Seq Code	Offense and Statute Codes	Statute Code	Amou
1	PSC Suspicious Person/Circumstance		
0.00			

LAW Incident Circumstances:

Seq Code	Contributing Circumstances	Comments
1	LT05 Commercial/Office Building	

LAW Incident Responders Detail

Seq Name	Unit
1 Connor, C	M466

Narrative:

On 06/18/15 around 1600 hours I was on duty as a Detective for the Windsor Police Department when Chief William Sampson came into the Detective's office and told me that he had just talked to a concerned citizen who wanted to report some suspicious activity. Chief Sampson said this citizen was concerned because he had heard that a suspicious male subject had recently approached the owner, MR [REDACTED], of [REDACTED] Gunsmithing, located at 737 US Route 5 S in Windsor about seeking employment at the gun shop. This concerned citizen told Chief Sampson that he had knowledge that this same suspicious male returned to the gun shop at a later date and had requested to purchase a sniper rifle and a machine gun. According to this concerned citizen, the suspicious male had taken photographs of the outside and inside of the gun shop. Also this citizen told Chief Sampson that the suspicious male subject told the MR [REDACTED] that he used to make guns for "Herzbollah". Chief Sampson asked me to make contact with MR [REDACTED] in an attempt to verify this information.

On 08/18/15 around 1800 hours I was out at Windsor Arms Custom Gunsmithing. I was met at the door by MR [REDACTED], who I know from previous law enforcement interactions. MR [REDACTED] led me into his place of business, where I told him the reason for my visit. MR [REDACTED] confirmed that the information relayed to Chief Sampson by the concerned citizen was true. The following is the facts as explained to me by MR [REDACTED].

MR [REDACTED] told me that sometime around two months ago an adult male subject of middle eastern decent came into MR [REDACTED] a place of business. MR [REDACTED] told me this male explained that he was a resident of the town of Windsor and that he was interested in seeking employment here at the gun shop making guns and modifying guns. According to MR [REDACTED] this male even offered to work here for no monetary payment. This male subject supposedly told MR [REDACTED] that he had considerable firearm experience and used to build modified submachine guns to kill Jews while he was in Palestine. MR [REDACTED] told me that this male subject seemed to in fact have a lot of knowledge about gun design and function.

MR [REDACTED] told me that about three weeks ago this same male subject returned to Windsor Arms Custom Gunsmithing. MR [REDACTED] told me that he has outside surveillance cameras outside his place of business. MR [REDACTED] told me he was inside his place of business when he saw on his surveillance monitor that this suspicious male subject was outside taking pictures of MR [REDACTED]'s gun shop. MR [REDACTED] told me that he went outside to ask the man why he was taking photos. According to MR [REDACTED] the man told him that he was taking pictures that he planned to give to MR [REDACTED] so that he could post them on Facebook. MR [REDACTED] said that he invited the male into the gun shop where the male took photos of the inside of the business and the merchandise on display. According to MR [REDACTED] this male subject never did provide him with copies of these photographs. MR [REDACTED] now suspects this male was taking pictures for the purpose of reviewing what was in place for security cameras, the type of locks and security on the doors, and to detail merchandise in the business.

MR [REDACTED] told me that on the second visit, the male subject said that he wished to purchase a sniper rifle and a machine gun. MR [REDACTED] told me that the male had not specified specific firearms for purchase nor had he shared his purpose or intent with these firearms. MR [REDACTED] told me that the male had provided him with his Vermont Operator's license which contained the male's photograph. MR [REDACTED] told me that he had made a photo copy of the male's operator's license and he had written the man's phone number down as documentation. MR [REDACTED] provided me with a photo copy of this information.

This photo copy was of Vermont drivers license [REDACTED] issued on [REDACTED] 5 to Mohsen K Mahdawi DOB [REDACTED] 90. The license lists MR Mahdawi's address as 15 Durkee Street in Windsor, Vermont. The license lists MR Mahdawi's physical features as 6' 0", 165 lbs, and brown eyes. According to MR [REDACTED] MR Mahdawi gave his phone number as 603 [REDACTED]. According to MR [REDACTED] MR Mahdawi told him that he was getting a job in Rutland, Vermont and that he was going to move to that area. MR [REDACTED] told me that MR Mahdawi has not come back to the gun shop since this meeting about three weeks ago.

I asked MR [REDACTED] if there was anything else that he could think of that might be helpful. MR [REDACTED] told me that his friend [REDACTED] a retired machinist and gun enthusiast, has told MR [REDACTED] that he has had similar conversations with MR Mahdawi about his ties to Palestine and his gun making experience. MR [REDACTED] gave me a phone number to contact MR [REDACTED] at 802 [REDACTED]. MR [REDACTED] advised that MR Mahdawi had told him that his wife was in the ARMY. It should be noted, that I am familiar with MR Mahdawi from a previous law enforcement interaction which took place at his residence at 15 Durkee Street in Windsor. During this interaction I was introduced to a woman who MR Mahdawi verbally identified as his wife. It was my understanding at this time, that his wife is a travelling nurse who works at a hospital in the upper valley area.

On 08/22/15 around 1640 hours I met with MR [REDACTED] at the Precision Museum located on Main Street in Windsor, where MR [REDACTED] works as a volunteer. I had called MR [REDACTED] prior to this meeting and let him know the intended topic of discussion. MR [REDACTED] told me that he has spoken several times about the suspicious male subject of middle eastern decent who came into MR [REDACTED]'s gun shop inquiring about potential employment and the possible purchase of a machine gun and a sniper rifle. MR [REDACTED] told me that roughly 2 or 3 weeks ago he was working at the Precision Museum and had a group of 15-20 people in the museum looking at items on display and listening to MR [REDACTED] discuss the history of various items. MR [REDACTED] said at this time a adult

male of middle eastern decent came into the museum and joined the group of people taking the museum tour. MR [REDACTED] told me that this male had a cell phone in his hand and appeared to be taking pictures and video of the people in the museum and the items on display, particularly the vintage firearms on display. MR [REDACTED] told me that at some point this suspicious male approached [REDACTED] that he was interested in purchasing an automatic rifle and a sniper rifle. MR [REDACTED] told me that he thought this was an odd topic of conversation to be having with a man that he has never met before. According to MR [REDACTED] this male subject told him that "I like to kill Jews". MR [REDACTED] told me that this comment made him nervous because he thought there may be some truth to the man's statement.

MR [REDACTED] then told me about a couple weeks ago he was in the Windsor Price Chopper in the check out line. MR [REDACTED] told me that he noticed that the same suspicious male from the museum was in the check out line ahead of him. MR [REDACTED] said this suspicious male had his cell phone in his hand and appeared to be taking pictures or video of people in the check out line and of the cashier. MR [REDACTED] told me that he has no idea why this male would be taking pictures in the store. MR [REDACTED] told me that he is certain this is the same male subject who approached MR [REDACTED] about working at his gun shop and purchasing firearms.

This report is for informational purposes only, and this information will be forwarded to the Department of Homeland Security.

Law Supplemental Narrative:

Seq Name	Date	Supplemental Narrative
1 Connor, C	11:43:17 09/28/15	Narrative

As of 09/28/15, no further information or suspicious activity has been received or reported.

A 2015 POLICE REPORT ABOUT MAHDAWI AT A GUN SHOP IN VERMONT.

That same summer, a tour guide at a vintage firearms museum said that a Middle Eastern man expressed interest in buying an automatic rifle and a sniper rifle. The tour guide told police at the time that the visitor said, "I like to kill Jews," according to the report.

Mahdawi later told an FBI agent that he had visited the gun shop and museum, but denied ever discussing buying weapons or killing Jews. The

police report has been sealed from the public as part of Mahdawi's immigration case. Mahdawi told the court that the FBI closed its investigation. The FBI agent told the judge that the investigation ended but wasn't officially closed. The judge concluded in his ruling last week that "some action would have resulted" if the FBI "had substantiated the information."

While the FBI investigation into Mahdawi was dealt with by the federal judge who cleared him for release, the [29-page ruling](#) made no mention of Mahdawi's social media posts paying tribute to family members with ties to Palestinian terrorist groups and implicated in the murder of Israeli civilians.

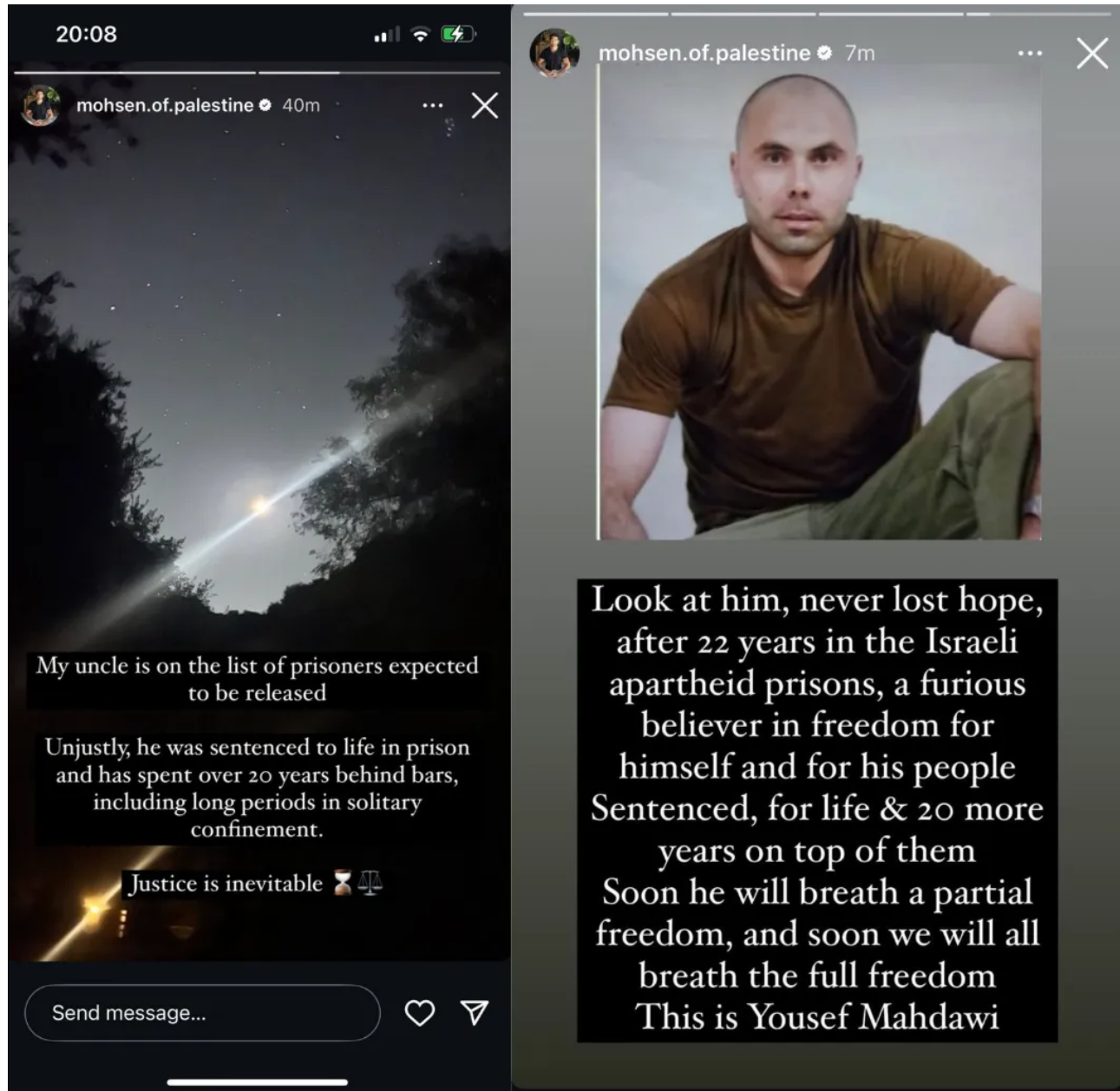


Last year on Instagram, Mahdawi described a cousin, Maysara Masharqa, as a "fierce resistance fighter" and "dreamer of liberation" who was [killed](#) "after a clash with a [traitor Zionist force](#)."

Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, a network of Palestinian armed groups, [said that](#) Masharqa was one of its "most prominent field commanders" in Jenin. The Israeli Defense Forces said Masharqa "took part in shooting attacks against Israeli communities" and was in a vehicle with Hamas's leader in Jenin when they were killed by the Israeli military in August of 2024.

[Israeli court records](#) show that Masharqa also confessed in 2012 to throwing improvised explosive devices and Molotov cocktails at IDF soldiers "on a large number of occasions and from a short distance," making pipe bombs, and conspiring to shoot and kill. He was sentenced to eight years in prison.

“Justice is inevitable,” Mahdawi wrote in an Instagram post in January of this year when his uncle’s name appeared on a list of Palestinian prisoners expected to be released [in a deal](#) that also returned to Israel four female soldiers who were taken hostage during the October 7, 2023, attack by Hamas.



MAHDAWI'S POSTS ABOUT HIS UNCLE, WHO WAS SENTENCED TO LIFE IN PRISON.

The uncle, Yousef Mahdawi, was sentenced to life in prison for planning a 2003 suicide bomber attack in the Israeli city of Netanya that injured

more than 60 people. Israeli [court documents show](#) that Yousef Mahdawi recruited the bomber and has received [about 1.1 million shekels](#) (\$311,000) from the Palestinian Authority since his arrest as part of its “[pay for slay](#)” program for Palestinian prisoners incarcerated in Israel.

Two of Mohsen Mahdawi’s other cousins died in a firefight with Israel in 2023. [An Instagram post](#) last October shows their faces and those of four more cousins and an uncle, all “born, raised, and killed in refugee camps” by “the Israeli ZiOnists [sic] violence in the West Bank,” he wrote.



Then there’s the question of what, exactly, Mahdawi has been doing since he arrived in the U.S. in 2014.

According to his [LinkedIn profile](#), Mahdawi studied computer engineering at Birzeit University in Gaza from 2008 to 2014. He then worked at a bank in New Hampshire for about a year. Mahdawi was at Dartmouth College in 2016 and 2017, and “studied a handful of classes for one year,” his LinkedIn profile said.

But Dartmouth told *The Free Press* that its records “indicate that no one by that name is or has been enrolled as a Dartmouth student.”

Mahdawi then studied at Lehigh University in Pennsylvania for more than two years, but left in the spring of 2020 without finishing a degree, the college said. His LinkedIn profile said he started a “Middle Eastern student organization” and “a catalyst group to bring change and diversity into the student senate.”

In 2021, Mahdawi began at Columbia. By then he had logged more than 20 semesters as an undergraduate between his stints at Birzeit and

Lehigh. After more than a decade in the U.S., he has said he hopes to graduate this month and start a master's degree program in September in international and public affairs. Columbia declined to comment about Mahdawi.

After October 7, Mahdawi emerged as one of the leaders of the anti-Israel protests on Columbia's campus. In November 2023, *New York* magazine described him as [co-president](#) of the [Palestinian Students Union](#). A month later, *60 Minutes* [called Mahdawi](#) a student on the “fight for a free Palestine and the fight against antisemitism.”



MOHSEN MAHDAWI SPEAKS AT A PROTEST ON THE COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY CAMPUS ON NOVEMBER 9, 2023. (PHOTO BY MUKTA JOSHI/GETTY IMAGES)

Mahdawi was known as a prominent member of Columbia University Apartheid Divest, the anti-Israel student group that [seized Hamilton Hall](#) in 2024. At a protest in January 2024, Mahdawi [screamed into a](#)

[megaphone](#), “There’s nothing, nothing more honorable than dying for a noble cause, for freedom, for humanity, and for justice.”

That month, Mahdawi was the subject of a complaint filed by a Jewish film student at Columbia, who accused him of [blaring a siren](#) through his megaphone, causing hearing damage to the pro-Israel counterprotesters. According to the film student, he didn’t know who Mahdawi was and called him a Nazi.

About two months later, the Jewish student was told by Columbia’s “student conduct team” that he had violated the Columbia discrimination policy by calling the person with the megaphone a Nazi. In other words, it wasn’t Mahdawi who the university was investigating for disciplinary action. Rather, Columbia was investigating the pro-Israel student who called Mahdawi a slur. (Columbia said later that it had decided not to take any disciplinary action.)

“We understand that this was not the result you had hoped for,” Columbia said. Columbia added that it “is committed to supporting you and any other members of the community who may have been impacted.”

Around the same time, Mahdawi was among about 60 student leaders asked to join a new group whose members were paid a stipend by the university to create “an opportunity for students to [learn from each other](#), listen to each other, build new connections, and bring back to Columbia a renewed sense of possibility,” according to a person familiar with the situation and Columbia’s description of the program.



Mahdawi was arrested during an April 14 interview that was supposed to be [the last step](#) before his formal naturalization as a U.S. citizen. He

passed a citizenship test and signed a document that said he was willing to take the [Oath of Allegiance to the United States](#). Three masked Homeland Security agents and a supervisor then arrested him.

“Even if he were a firebrand, his conduct is protected by the First Amendment,” [the judge wrote](#) in last week’s ruling. The ruling means that Mahdawi can live in Vermont and remain a Columbia student while the government tries to deport him. Mahdawi and his lawyer, Luna Droubi, didn’t respond to *The Free Press*’s requests for comment.

A sealed document in Mahdawi’s case, signed by Secretary of State Marco Rubio, suggests that the Trump administration will keep trying to use Mahdawi’s incendiary statements against him.

The document, seen by *The Free Press*, cites “threatening rhetoric and intimidation of pro-Israeli bystanders” by Mahdawi at protests that called for “Israel’s destruction.” Such protests reinforce antisemitism and “potentially undermine the peace process underway in the Middle East,” the document says.

The administration claims that Mahdawi’s presence alone “would have potentially serious adverse foreign policy consequences and would compromise a compelling U.S. foreign policy interest.”

When I asked Jessica Vaughan, director of policy studies at the Center for Immigration Studies, how she sees Mahdawi’s case unfolding, she told me, “I can’t see any outcome in which he remains in the United States. If all of those things are corroborated”—his family ties, Instagram posts, the gun shop—“this is a slam-dunk case, and more than enough to deport him.” In fact, Vaughan argues that Mahdawi’s familial ties to terrorism “should have been enough to refuse him entry at all.”

Conor Fitzpatrick, a supervising senior attorney at the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression, views it quite differently. “Under the First Amendment, there are established standards for things like incitement and threats, and we require a very high showing from the government before they can punish someone for otherwise protected speech. The idea that we’re going to have essentially a diet version of that for immigrants is not only antithetical to free speech, but it just wouldn’t work.” He added, “We judge people not by the company they keep, but by their own actions.”

Prosecutors haven’t detailed their precise legal strategy, but the judge’s order said the Trump administration “states that it has some other information” about Mahdawi’s history “that it has not shared with the court.”

Mahdawi has said his deportation to the West Bank would be “[a death sentence](#).”



For more coverage on Trump’s deportations, read Jed Rubenfeld on Mahmoud Khalil:

Both Left and Right Are Wrong About Mahmoud Khalil

JED RUBENFELD



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Maya Sulkin

Maya Sulkin is a reporter at *The Free Press*. Before that, Maya was chief of staff. She started as an intern in 2021 while a student at Columbia University.

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